

THE HOUSE THAT MARY BUILT: 930 MENDOCINO AVENUE

by Jeff Elliott

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For decades, the brown shingle building across from the high school has been a bit of an architectural mystery. Some in Santa Rosa's architectural community thought it was designed by Julia Morgan; others were confident it was another work by Brainerd Jones, who was the architect of nearby Comstock House. There was also the opinion that while it was unlikely to be an actual Frank Lloyd Wright design, it must have come from the drafting table of someone who trained in the master's office. Even the late Dan Peterson, who literally wrote the book on Santa Rosa's architectural heritage, didn't know who designed it - and he not only had it placed on the National Register of Historic Places, he owned it for a number of years, using it as his architectural office.¹ But it's now known that the building was designed by Mary Rockwell Hook.

She was related to the property owners but this was not nepotism at work. Mary was a capable architect as this building shows, even though it was only the second of her designs to be built. She was also a pioneer several times over, for whom recognition is overdue.



930 Mendocino Ave. PHOTO: Wikimedia Commons

Mary Rockwell Hook (1877-1978) decided to become an architect in 1902.² Few professions were open to women in that era and any who wanted a career were suspected of being something between an ardent feminist or political radical. She had qualified support from family; her father approved of the artistic aspects of architectural study and paid her tuitions, yet expected she accept no salary when she found a job. And of all the professions to pursue, architecture was among the least welcoming to women at the time, having evolved from the manly building trade. At the first firm she approached for a job she was told, "We're sorry but we could not take a woman. You can't swear at women and they can't climb all over full sized details." But the next office was glad to accept her. "They never needed to swear and I could manage full size details," she wrote in her memoir. So rare was her kind that even by the time she reached middle age, you could have assembled every single American female architect in a small school auditorium that seated 200.

Although she was denied entry to the fraternal system that advanced the careers of her male colleagues, she had a major advantage: Mary was a Rockwell. The wealthy and esteemed family spent much of their time traveling abroad or visiting each other; she and her four sisters were immersed in high culture.³ After she graduated Wellesley College in 1900, for example, the family spent eight months in Italy and Switzerland. They were barely back home in Kansas when her uncle, General Adna Chaffee, was appointed military governor of the Philippines. So off they went again, this time visiting Japan and China and the Middle East as well. The next year were trips to Venezuela and Sicily. And so life went for the Rockwells.

Her architectural studies began in 1903, when she was the only female student in that department at the Art Institute of Chicago. Reference works state she studied and/or graduated from the *Ecole des Beaux-Arts* in Paris, but that's not quite true. According to her autobiography, she was enrolled in an *atelier* operated by Jacques-Marcel Auburtin, a rising star in French architecture (and who had recently proposed marriage to one of Mary's sisters). Mary did take an entrance exam - being the first woman since Julia Morgan to get that far - but received a failing grade. In truth, she could not have attended the school for very long, even if she had passed all the exams; although it was no longer off-limits to women, there still was a policy that students couldn't be older than thirty, and Mary was already 29.

But at the same time, being accepted by an *atelier* was a not insubstantial achievement. They acted as an adjunct to the *Ecole* proper; some were even located inside the main building. It was a bit like having workshops training

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medieval journeymen grafted onto a modern college. You studied - often for years - at an *atelier préparatoire* to prep for passing all three entrance exams, then once you were admitted your student work was prepared under the guidance of an *atelier*, possibly the same one.⁴

Here is exactly what Mary wrote of her Beaux-Arts experience, which biographers consistently misstate:

Through Kitty's acquaintance with Marcel Auburtin, I arranged to study architecture at his atelier in Paris. He had seven Americans enrolled - all graduated of Yale and Princeton. When these boys heard a girl was coming they didn't like the idea. They decided to name me "Liz." It turned out that we all became lifelong friends. These boys worked three years before they passed all the examinations to enter the Beaux Arts

We all took the first examination. I learned that I was the second woman who had ever taken an examination at Beaux Arts. The other woman was Miss Morgan of San Francisco who later devoted most of her life to the building of the Hearst Palace of great renown in California.

One must pass the first exam to qualify for the second, then must pass the second for the third, and so on for several weeks. None of us passed the first one, but what a memorable day! They put me in a big library with guards and locked the door. Hundreds of French boys begin to take these exams every six months, beginning at 14 or 50 years of age. All day I could hear them yelling and singing.

When the day was over one of the American boys came to rescue me. He said he would take me by the back way because all day the French boys had been planning to throw buckets of water on me as I entered the big courtyard. He had a taxi waiting and we ran, falling into it with our drafting boards, "T" squares and triangles.

Incidents of gender harassment aside, it left fun memories. She and a couple of her sisters lived in the raucous student quarter of the Left Bank and she wrote happily about bicycle sojourns into the countryside. She was still in Paris when the April, 1906 earthquake hit Santa Rosa. Her mother later told her, "On the morning of the earthquake she [mother] appeared fully dressed with hat, veil, and gloves and wondering if she shouldn't call her sister, Mrs. Finlaw, to cancel their dinner engagement. A call she couldn't have made. All the phone lines were down."

RIGHT: House at 54 E. 53rd Street in 2008 PHOTO: Kansas City Missouri Architectural/Historic Inventory

Mary returned to Kansas City later in 1906 intending to join an architectural firm, only to be told by father Bertrand that he would consent to her working in an office only as an unpaid student. It would be easy here to wave off Bertrand as being a paternalistic jerk but he was a loving parent and notably forward-thinking. The Rockwell family has a 1911 newspaper clipping that commented Captain Rockwell had "recently attracted considerable attention by the assertion that the daughter or daughters of a family, no matter what their station in life, should be taught a profession in which they could earn their own living." It was more likely that he was being protective,



knowing she faced discrimination that might be insurmountable and it would be easier for her to walk away from an unpaid internship than bear the professional stigma of quitting a position without expecting references, should she feel a need to leave. And Papa did actively support Mary's ambitions; he purchased a lot in a Kansas City subdivision for her to build her first house (modern view to right).

She later wrote that house "followed the latest trends of California cottages" and the design, with its asymmetrical saltbox roof with extended eaves and dormer windows, was in keeping with the contemporary Arts & Crafts style. In particular, it resembles Gustav Stickley house design No. 28 which she could have seen in a 1905 issue of his magazine, "The Craftsman." After it was completed, she lived it in for a month "to try it out."

From her autobiography: "Next came a house for my sister Florence Edwards in Santa Rosa, California." The Edwards' moved in autumn of 1908, so the home at 930 Mendocino was designed 1907-1908.

She designed a house for a college friend and her father purchased another Kansas City lot, this intended for her to

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build an 11-bedroom family manse. That home and eight others she designed in the area between 1908 and 1927 are on the National Register of Historic Places.⁵ Together, they describe what might be called a "Mary Rockwell Hook style" that was in step with the progressive craftsman designs coming from leading architects at the same time.

RIGHT: Mary Rockwell c. 1911 PHOTO: Rockwell Family Archives

Her homes were usually asymmetrical, according to the authors of the Register nomination for the Kansas City houses, with a "T" or "L" shaped ground plan instead of a square or rectangular box. Windows were plentiful and also not symmetric, and the floor plan was often multi-level with irregularly shaped rooms. In some, she included an area that could be used as a stage. The home she designed for herself was described as "a rambling aggregation of intersecting wings and extruding gables, dormers, decks and porches." She incorporated outdoor space into the designs with sleeping porches, upper decks, balconies, patios that were called "outdoor living rooms" and even integrated swimming pools. She gave rooms an Old World touch by often making fireplaces and chimneys out of rough stone and antique tile. "Long before recycling of materials became an economical advantage, Mrs. Hook was rummaging in demolished buildings and salvage yards for useable or picturesque artifacts, which were employed both structurally and decoratively."



The Santa Rosa house matches her typical style, although in appearance it's quite different from the Kansas City houses. It fits into the shingle-style "First Bay Region Tradition" that characterizes residential designs from that period by Julia Morgan and others and she may have also been encouraged by character of the neighborhood, where there were new and prominent Brainerd Jones buildings in this style - Comstock House, the Saturday Afternoon Club, and the lost Paxton House - just down the street. Mary would have been very familiar with those shingled places; she was designing the house for sister Florence, who was a past president of the Club, and the Oates family (first owners of Comstock House) threw a party for another of the Rockwell sisters in late 1907, just about when Mary would have been drawing architectural plans.



Mary loved sleeping porches, and wrote in her memoir, "This and That," of once waking up with snow on her blankets. Her original design for the Rockwell family home had a sleeping porch off of every bedroom, and the Edwards House in Santa Rosa had a screened porch as large as a regular bedroom. Now enclosed with windows, the exterior of the porch can be seen above left, and the door to the porch - shown here opened - has a diamond paned lattice window that lights the second floor hallway.

(As the building has been converted to private offices, only common areas are pictured here.)



Similarities to her first home design can be seen above in the dormer windows, strong roof corbels, and square bump out window seat in the living room. The earlier house also had a juliet balcony, although the railing is currently steel and not likely to be original. The balcony on the Edwards House faces south and is now heavily shaded by mature trees, but would have brought considerable natural light into the second floor hallway. Note the decorative balusters that continue the craftsman design of the glass doors, discussed below.



The ground floor plan of the Edwards House is quite novel. From the front door is a large entrance hall with a free

standing stairway in the center. Walking directly forward passes under the stairway's landing and directly into the living room. At the foot of the stairway on the other end of the entrance hall are four matching glass doors partitioned into a Arts & Crafts pattern very similar to Stickley designs of that same period. Above left: The double doors that led to the dining room, and to their immediate right, another door into the living room.



Above: The glass door leading into the panty with the alabaster stained glass illuminated from behind.



The pantry is quite large in proportion to the 3-bedroom house and suggests Mary's sister, Florence, had quite a dish collection. In a short essay about the 1906 earthquake she lamented that "...[We] listened to the crash of our beautiful wedding china and glass as it smashed on the floor. My parents screaming as they both fell down on the floor amid glass and china and cut their knees and hands."⁶



Although the kitchen is bungalow-sized, the lighting is very good with a pair of east windows and one facing north providing supplemental light. A sunny kitchen was not to be taken for granted; in many home designs of that period the kitchen was an afterthought. In Brainerd Jones' original 1904 design of Comstock House, for example, the stove was in the least ventilated part of the room with the single source of natural light being a window connected to a porch, several feet behind the cook - it must have been onerous to prepare the simplest meals. Inclusion of a well-designed kitchen shows the architect understood how domestic work functioned, and may demonstrate a significant advantage for architects who grew up in Victorian America as girls instead of boys. Mary wrote in her autobiography that at her first job, the head draftsman asked her, "tell me, what does a butler do in a butler's pantry?"



Most of the windows in the Edwards House are casements, which were very modern at the time and part of the Mary Rockwell Hook "style." But the latches on these dual windows above the stairway landing would require a ladder to open, making it impractical to cool the second floor at the end of a hot summer's day by inviting in the foggy marine layer.

Current owner Trae Seely deserves highest praise for his good taste and judgement in restoration of the house, but the interiors may have been modified by some of the (at least) five previous owners. The complete lack of ornamentation is surprising; except for the alabaster glass doors and picture rail, the house is spartan. There is no wall crown molding, nor basic details such as returns on door or window trim. Missing are typical craftsman style features such as box beams and natural wood paneling, except for the fireplace mantles. As the closeup above right shows, the crown molding above doors, windows and cabinets is not just simple, but minimalist. But while there are examples such as the newel post that do show signs of replacement, why would someone would tear out substantial original woodwork? It would be very interesting to compare these interiors to those in other houses she designed in that period. If original, it would be notable as a pre-modernist take on the general craftsman style.

Mary Rockwell Hook's career divides neatly into two chapters. The latter part began in 1935 when she purchased 55 acres near Sarasota, Florida for only \$10,000 and designed many of the homes there, including an artist's colony⁷.

But the first part began with the house for her friend and sister Florence, and concluded in 1929 with the final construction of another California house for her sister Katherine in Woodside. That chateau-like manor house, called "Le Soleil," is as opulent as the Santa Rosa house is humble, with gold leaf ceilings and a 12-car garage. Sister "Kitty" - the same one who was once engaged to the Beaux-Arts *atelier* master - married Francis Crosby, who was president of the famous Key System streetcar service that linked San Francisco and the East Bay cities (until General Motors, Firestone Tire, and Phillips Petroleum conspired to put them out of business, that is). Like the Edwards House, Le Soleil is mostly unknown as a Mary Rockwell Hook design, and her name wasn't mentioned in promotional materials when the estate sold in April, 2013 for \$8,400,000.

Also in the first part of career she designed most of the campus for the Pine Mountain Settlement School, a boarding school and local cultural center in a remote area of the southern Appalachian Mountains.⁸ From her memoirs it is clear this work meant much to her and although the site is now a National Historic Landmark, it never brought her great acclaim. But that certainly was okay with her; while she clearly loved architecture, she did not have the ego driving her to want to be The Great Architect. By the age Mary decided that she wanted to pursue a career in the field, Julia Morgan already had a BS from UC/Berkeley in Civil Engineering and had completed an internship with Bernard Maybeck. There were years that Mary did not practice architecture at all; near the end of WWI she worked for the Post Office translating "Spanish trade mail" and later spent a year working for a charity assisting French peasant-farmers trying to reestablish their lives postwar. She often spent hours a day riding horses and sometimes toured in amateur theatrical productions. It seems that she had a well-balanced and happy life right up to her death at age 101.

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As for the Edwards House, Florence and her husband did not live there long. It appears that they moved in during the autumn of 1908, judging by the newspaper clipping mentioned below and because the Rockwell family scrapbooks contain an October 12, 1908 receipt from the Fountaingrove Vineyard Co. for five gallons of "Saut (sweetened)" - presumably sauterne, which was quite popular in the day - that cost 75 cents a gallon, plus another buck for the keg. Presumably there were more gallons of the cloying sweet wine on hand when James was elected mayor of Santa Rosa in 1910 and invited the congratulatory crowd that gathered outside their home to come in and have "something to eat and drink." Hopefully Florence didn't lose too many pieces of her replenished dishware collection that evening.

The Edwards apparently sold the house in 1913 to Milton Wasserman, one of the larger hops dealers in the area. Florence and James Edwards moved back to McDonald Avenue, where he had lived most of his life, this time taking up residence at number 925, directly next to the Mabelton mansion.

The James R. Edwards are now comfortably installed in their handsome new residence on Mendocino avenue. They have certainly good reason to be proud of their new home and the friends who have been privileged with an inspection of the interior furnishing and arrangement cannot say too much in compliment of the taste displayed.

- "Society Gossip", Press Democrat, November 22, 1908



¹National Register of Historic Places, Wasserman House, Santa Rosa, California, National Register #79000562

²"IAWA Spotlight: Mary Rockwell Hook", International Archive of Women in Architecture Newsletter, Fall 1991

³Elliott, Jeff; "1906 Earthquake: The Legends Of Captain Rockwell"; <http://comstockhousehistory.blogspot.com/2013/06/1906-earthquake-legends-of-captain.html>

⁴Elliott, Cecil D. "The American Architect from the Colonial Era to the Present"; McFarland, 2003, pg. 64

⁵National Register of Historic Places, Residential Structures by Mary Rockwell Hook, Kansas City, Missouri, National Register #64000399

⁶op cit. "The Legends Of Captain Rockwell"

⁷Bergen, Brooksie; "Mary Hook brought her skill, love to Siesta"; Sarasota Herald-Tribune, Apr 27, 1994

⁸op cit. "IAWA Spotlight: Mary Rockwell Hook"